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ABSTRACT

This discussion of the development of oral proficiency in a second language first examines relevant research and then suggests guidelines for designing classroom techniques for teaching oral proficiency. Research in cognitive psychology is reviewed, focusing on information processing theory and forgetting theory. Research discussed in the area of second language acquisition includes optimal input, repeated practice, and positive affect. Four principles for oral proficiency development drawn from the research are: (1) repeated practice is necessary for fluency; (2) increased practice creates conditions for restructuring; (3) optimal practice activities should be comprehensible, interesting, relevant, challenging, and in sufficient quantity; and (4) optimal practice activities should be meaning-focused and communicative in nature. Eight characteristics of effective instruction based on these principles are outlined, and ways in which they can be incorporated into instruction for developing oral proficiency are suggested. The eight characteristics include the following: attainable and challenging objectives; learner understanding of content; varied context for linguistic patterns to be learned; spiraled sequencing; minimal correction; use of motivating games; combination of formal and informal settings for instruction; and periodic testing. A 23-item bibliography and instructional examples are appended. (MSE)

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Theory to Practice: Developing Oral Proficiency

The more we know about how learning takes place, the more constrained teaching becomes and the more creativity of teachers is focused on getting tangible results (21). This paper is to explore the process by which students acquire automaticity of oral communication. Based on research findings on foreign language acquisition and human information processing of cognitive psychology, we will establish guidelines for designing various techniques that inspire students to develop oral proficiency.

RESEARCH IN COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

The information processing theory in cognitive psychology provides us with a developmental view of the acquisition of language skills (1; 2; 11; 13; 19). According to this theory, two stages are involved in the process of acquiring language skills: controlled and automatic processing. Controlled processing is a temporary activation under attention control and it is capacity-limited and requires more time for the activation. At this stage the learners have to spend much of their attention to integrate the pieces of information. Controlled processing necessarily intrudes on the ability to perform simultaneously any other task

that also requires a capacity investment. Automatic processing involves the activation of certain nodes in memory every time the appropriate inputs are present. This activation is a learned response that has been built up through the consistent mapping of the same input to the same pattern of activation over many trials. Controlled processing requires attention and takes time, but through practice, subskills become automatic and controlled processes are free to be allocated to higher level of processing. It is controlled processes that regulate the flow of information from working memory to long-term memory. Learning involves time, but once automatic processes are set up at one stage in the development of a complex information-processing skill, controlled processes are free to be allocated to higher levels of processing (13). This conceptualization is definitely appropriate for language learning and teaching. It suggests that repeated practice is necessary for the students to develop their fluency in a foreign language.

McLaughlin (12) argues that practice can lead to improvement in performance as sub-skills become automated and it is also possible for increased practice to create conditions for restructuring, i.e. the qualitative change from stage to stage with each stage constitutes a

new internal organization and not merely the addition of new structural elements. The implication for language learning is that increased practice not only leads to quantitative change but also results in qualitative change, i.e. practice can assist students in developing both their fluency and precision of their foreign language skills. This is approved by many foreign language teaching experts such as Ellis (6) and Rivers (16). Ellis (6) concludes that language learning involves consolidating hypotheses about the language by accumulating confirmatory evidence. Rivers (16) believes that, through increased practice, foreign language learners will modify and improve their mental representation of the language rules.

Another researched evidence for increased practice of foreign language skills is from the forgetting theory. According to Stevick (20), whether new material makes it from short term memory (STM) to long term memory (LTM) and how long it remains there are largely affected by how much work the learner's mind does on it while it is still within the STM. This shows that it is very important for the students to constantly review what they have learned in order for them to internalize what they learn.

RESEARCH IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In order for the classroom to be an efficient place to facilitate language learning the teacher should provide optimal input. According to Krashen (10) optimal input should be comprehensible, interesting, and relevant, and must be in sufficient quantity. Active involvement is necessary. But exposure to input alone is insufficient. It is essential to provide opportunities for students to become actively involved (6).

Ellis (7) studied the effects of practice on language proficiency and warned that controlled practice facilitates acquisition only when it is communicative, i.e. meaning-focused in nature.

Positive affect (6; 10) is another factor that facilitates language learning. Low-anxiety and a supportive learning environment are important for successful language learning.

In the studies of the characteristics of successful language learning and teaching, instructional researchers (3; 14; 16; 17; 18) also point out the necessity of repeated practice. Rubin (17) said that good language learners are willing to repeat and seeks out opportunities to use the language. Rivers (16) advised that teachers need to give their students many opportunities to practice speaking because one learns

to speak by speaking. Prokop (14) found that good language learners take an active, independent and self-assured approach to a learning task.

The above discussion suggests that automaticity comes from instruction that provides sufficient input and focuses on tasks that require constant meaningful communication. It shows the importance of practice in learning a foreign language. However, frequent repetition of the same activity is often difficult for adult foreign language learners because overlearning through repetitious activities often causes fatigue and distaste on the part of the learner. Consequently, it is essential for teachers to design various learning activities that encourage active meaningful communication. The second part of the paper provides eight guidelines for designing various techniques that inspire students to develop oral proficiency. Each of the guidelines is discussed in relation to the development of automaticity of oral communication.

GUIDELINES FOR PROVIDING CONDITIONS FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING

1. One characteristic of effective instruction is for the teachers to specify objectives that are both attainable and challenging. If the specified tasks are too difficult the students will be frustrated and

therefore loose confidence and interest in the practice activities. On the other hand, if the tasks are too easy, the students will feel that they are not learning enough and may become bored in the practice. In order to establish attainable and challenging objectives the teacher needs to know the students well. The information can be obtained either from weekly testing or from talking to student representatives.

2. Another characteristic of effective instruction is that the specified objectives should be taught so that students fully understand the content. Content here refers to the communicative tasks and the vocabulary, grammar, discourse devices and cultural information that are required for accomplishing the communicative tasks. According to Krashen (10, P. 21), a necessary condition for the students to move from i to i+1 is that the students understand input that contains i+1. Without fully understanding the content, students cannot benefit from the practice activities because 1) they are not confident in themselves and therefore hesitant in participation, and 2) continuous questioning in the native language about the content will interfere with practice activities. The 1:2 practice in the Chinese Program at the University of Pittsburgh proves to work well. The 1:2 practice means that the content is

introduced in the first hour and the next two hours are devoted to practice for automaticity. The purpose during the first hour is for the students to understand the content (i+1). English is used during the first hour so that students can fully understand the content. Practice in Chinese during the first hour is done to enhance understanding. During the next two hours, students concentrate on developing the automaticity of the communicative tasks taught in the first hour. These classes are conducted entirely in Chinese. The questions that may occur during practice activities may be solved either during the teacher's office hours or in the student group discussion.

3. The third characteristic of effective instruction is to multicontextualize the linguistic patterns. New patterns should be practiced in meaningful discourse contexts of communicative tasks, as illustrated by Appendix A. It is important for the students to develop automaticity at sentence level but it is insufficient because discrete communicative tasks are not appropriate for developing true fluency. Contexts at the discourse level have to be used to help students develop oral proficiency. The use of multicontexts is essential because they provide learning conditions for the students to develop both automaticity and better understanding of

the new pattern. The use of multicontexts helps to avoid rote memory on the part of the learner.

4. The fourth characteristic of effective instruction is to adopt a spiralling model for sequencing. New content should be always integrated with what the students learned before. Appendix B is an example in this regard. The integration of the new with the learned enhances understanding of the new information. Furthermore, it is crucial to use the same words and patterns in a variety of text situations in order to develop automaticity of the language. Another advantage of combining the new content with the learned is that the students will feel a sense of achievement and therefore become highly motivated in participating.

5. The fifth characteristic of effective instruction is to avoid too much correction. Teachers should create an atmosphere where students are challenged but not embarrassed by their errors. The following are some of the classroom techniques that we find useful: 1) Errors should be corrected only if the errors constitutes a pattern. Sometimes we can find out if it is a slip of tongue or a real error by simply asking the student to repeat what he or she said. 2) Teachers should not show impatience. Teachers should realize that it takes time for the students to correct their errors, too much

correction at one time can only create frustration which may inhibit active participation on the part of the students. 3) Correction should be reserved until the students finish talking; teachers can take notes as students talk. 4) Errors are a natural part of language learning. Teachers should examine the students errors and to see if they can figure out why the student is making the errors and therefore assist the student to improve his or her learning strategies.

6. The sixth characteristic of effective instruction is to incorporate motivating games. Games can lower anxiety, thus making acquisition more likely. They are useful tools for reinforcing learning. Games encourage genuine active communication, provide large quantities of practice, and create meaning-centered atmosphere.

A variety of games can be used for practice activities. For instance, a simple game like Bingo can be easily adapted for language learning (Appendix C). It assists students to review certain communicative tasks comprehensively. In order to win the Bingo game they have to repeat the same communicative tasks over and over. However students do not feel bored because the practice activity is meaningful and interesting. There are a variety of resources (5; 8; 15; 22; 23) from which we can adopt our own games for developing automaticity.

7. The seventh characteristic of effective instruction is to combine formal and informal settings. Like games, the use of informal settings may reduce the artificiality of the classroom. Students enjoy communicating in real-life situations. I remember vividly how excited a first-year student was one day when she came to the class and said to me, "I saw a real Chinese and I could understand her." A variety of activities can be designed for informal setting practice: bringing in native speakers to the class, organizing language exchanges or language camps. The informal setting provides an opportunity for comprehensive review. It can be motivating and help students accustomed to the variations of the language. Informal setting practices are more effective when they are carried out with a clearly defined purpose. For instance, after a unit on family, students can be assigned to interview native speakers and then share their obtained information in class.

8. Another characteristic of effective instruction is to test periodically. This encourages students to go over materials and provides feedback to both the teachers and the learners. The purpose of tests is to help improve learning. Tests should be performance oriented and closely linked to the communicative tasks specified in

the curriculum.

The above guidelines are adaptable to any foreign language instruction. Awareness of these guidelines may assist teachers in developing and modifying instructional activities for the purpose of improving teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how theories are utilized to assist teachers in improving the process of teaching and learning. In relation to the development of oral proficiency in a foreign language, four principles are arrived at from the review of the relevant research: 1) Repeated practice is necessary for the students to develop their fluency in a foreign language. 2) Increased practice creates conditions for restructuring. 3) Optimal practice activities should be comprehensible, interesting, relevant, challenging and in sufficient quantity. 4) Optimal practice activities should be meaning-focused and communicative in nature. Eight guidelines are discussed with regard to developing oral proficiency in a foreign language.

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Appendix A

Multicontextualizing the Linguistic Patterns

The Verb+GUO pattern can be used in the following interrelated communicative tasks:

1) Talking about language studies such as:
   Nǐ xuéGUO fǎyǔ ma? ... xuéLE duōjiǔ?
   ... nán xué ma?
2) Talking about travel experience such as:
   Nǐ qùGUO Fǎguó ma? ... zhùLE duōjiǔ?
3) Talking about food preference such as:
   Nǐ chīGUO Fǎguó fàn ma? ... hǎo chī ma?

Appendix B

A Spiralling Model for Sequencing

The following are five communicative exchanges: Numbers 1 through 3 are the new content. Numbers 4 and 5 were taught in the previous lessons. The 5 exchanges can be integrated naturally in practice.

1) ...nǎlǐ lái DE? (Where are you from?)
2) ... shémma shíhòu lái DE?
   (When did you come here?)
3) ... zài zhèlǐ niànshū ma? (...studying here?)
4) ... niàn shémma? (What do you study?)
5) ... nán xué ma? (... difficult to study?)

Appendix C

Bingo

The information in each block is about one of your classmates. You need to go around the class and ask different people until you find the person whom the information in the block is about. Ask the person to sign the block and then go to the next person. Keep doing this until you win the game. Have fun!

Tā jiā yǒu sì ge rén.	Tā jīnnián èrshí suì.	Tā fùqīn shì lǜshī.
Tā mèimei huì shuō fǎyǔ.	Tā yǒu yí ge jiějie.	Tā méi yǒu mèimei.
Tā yǒu liǎng ge mèimei.	Tā fùqīn qùGUO fǎguó.	Tā yǒu wǔ ge dìdi.
Tā jiā yǒu bā ge rén.	Tā mǔqīn shì hùshì.	Tā jīnnián shíjiǔ suì.